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THE GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT OF "PARKER'S BACK"

by

Kara Brewer

An essay

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Arts in the Department of English
University of the Pacific

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This essay, written and submitted by

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"Parker's Back" is the last short story Flannery O'Connor wrote before the ravaging disease Lupus took her life in August of 1964. When Caroline Gordon visited her "in a hospital a few weeks before her death," she spoke of her concern about finishing it. "She told me that the doctor had forbidden her to do any work. He said that it was all right to write a little fiction, though, she added with a grin and drew a notebook from under her pillow. She kept it there she told me and was trying to finish a story which she hoped to include in the volume which we both knew would be published posthumously."¹ The story was "Parker's Back," and it was, indeed, published after her death: initially in Esquire magazine (April, 1965) and later that same year in Everything that Rises Must Converge.

In his "Introduction" to that collection Robert Fitzgerald wrote of "the asceticism," the "peculiar discipline" of Flannery O'Connor's style. Having known her from the early days of her career, Fitzgerald was aware of "How much has been refrained from, and how much else has been cut out and thrown away, in order that the bold narrative sentences should present

¹Caroline Gordon, "An American Girl" in The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor, Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson, Eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 135.

just what they present and in just this order!"² Frederick Hoffman, on the other hand, has praised her economy and lucidity of style, and commented on "the most remarkable clarity and ease"³ with which she communicated. Fortunately, critics of her work need no longer conjecture about the process of creation in Flannery O'Connor's work. Thanks to the care and generosity of Regina O'Connor, her mother, many of the early manuscripts of her works have been deposited in the manuscript collection at the library of Georgia College in Milledgeville.

The value of such manuscript materials has been recognized by numerous scholars. As Robert Scholes and Richard Kain point out in their "Introduction" to The Workshop of Daedalus, "very seldom are we allowed such a glimpse into the creative process." Joyce's notebooks and early manuscripts for A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man are "of more than esthetic interest," however, "for the mind of the artist is not easy of access. But in the workshop we can see the mind unmasked, intent upon its work...For those who wish to understand Joyce and are not content merely to explicate his works,

²Robert Fitzgerald, "Introduction," Everything That Rises Must Converge, Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1965), p. xxxii.

³Frederick Hoffman, "The Search for Redemption," The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor, Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson, Eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 32.

materials such as these are indispensable."⁴ Furthermore, the editors suggest, careful study of the genesis and development of a novel or story can lead the critic to more accurate interpretation of the work at hand.

Written during O'Connor's maturity as an artist, the successive drafts for "Parker's Back" provide excellent source material for this kind of genetic criticism. They yield significant information about her mind, her craft as a writer, and about the imaginative development and meaning of her work. They also serve as ample evidence that until the end of her life Flannery O'Connor's achievements were the results of disciplined hard work, as well as extraordinary talent. In fact, they prove that the words she wrote before the publication of her first novel: "No one can convince me that I should not rewrite as much as I do," were as valid a description of her critical approach to her craft at the end of her creative life as at the beginning.⁵

She was evidently not disturbed by the discriminating process of writing and then discarding what she had written. In 1962 she told Frank Daniel: "I rewrite, edit and throw

⁴Robert Scholes and Richard Kain, "Introduction," The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Raw Materials for 'A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man' (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. xii.

⁵Robert Giroux, "Introduction," The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor, Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1972), p. xi.

away. It's slow and searching."⁶ Fortunately, however, she did not throw away all the early versions of "Parker's Back," and the collection of manuscripts for this story is more complete than many of the others. The papers include several loose pages, three incomplete fragments, one whole preliminary draft and one copy of the final version. Written on the back of the first page of one of the fragments are the words "First Draft." Three and a quarter typewritten pages long, this fragment (henceforth in this paper to be called Fragment A) opens with Parker's vision of the tattooed man at the fair and describes his adolescence and his experiences in the navy. It ends with a description of the tattoos he had accumulated in his trips around the world.

O'Connor was evidently dissatisfied with this version of the story, however, for the subsequent version (Fragment B) contains none of this material; Parker's tattoos resulted simply from his desire to attract women. These thirteen pages (page eleven is missing) deal instead with Parker's marriage to Sarah Ruth. In fact, the first sentences of this draft depict Sarah Ruth, who is "eighteen years old and plain," and her jealousy of the old women for whom Parker works. Parker cannot understand why he "loved her," nor why, after their violent first encounter when Sarah Ruth hit him with a broom, he had married her. Most of the pages of this version recount

⁶Frank Daniel, "Flannery O'Connor Shapes Her Own Capital," Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution (July 22, 1962).

Parker's ruminations about this quandary, and this partial draft comes to a close when he is sitting in the tattooist's studio after having a picture of Jesus tattooed on his back to please his wife.

The third attempt to write the story will not be dealt with in this paper because it repeats with only minor variations the first pages of Fragment B. This effort was abandoned after only six pages in favor of the final complete preliminary draft which, with some minor corrections, became the published version. Evidently O'Connor had completed a goodly portion of this final draft before she was hospitalized, because a single page from a stenographer's notebook--probably the one to which Caroline Gordon referred--contains handwritten passages from the end of the story. These were later typewritten into the final draft and revised, so one must assume that she subsequently was out of the hospital and well enough to use the typewriter.

The three fragments, the loose pages, and the final preliminary draft are marked with numerous revisions--handwritten and typewritten insertions and crossed out passages on almost every page. Fortunately, it is possible to read the crossed out words, and one can see how the revisions developed. Within the scope of this paper it is impossible to treat each of these alterations; but the major changes in narrative structure, imagery, theme and characterization, as the story moved from one version to another, can be traced. And the comparison of these early drafts with each other and with the published version yields fascinating insight about

the way the story and her telling of it grew in the process of creation.

The initial genesis of the idea for this outlandish tale must remain a mystery, but O'Connor told Robert Donner that before she could start she had "to have a story in mind--some incident or observation that excites me and in which I see fictional possibilities."⁷ Perhaps like the child in her story "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" Flannery O'Connor was led to insights about God's all-encompassing love by the sight of misshapen freaks and tattooed men in a traveling side show. Her knowledge of the complicated details of the art of tattooing, however, was probably gleaned from a book in her library entitled Memoirs of a Tattooist: George Burchett (compiled and edited by Peter Leighton, London, Olbourne Press, n.d.) which "describes intricate ways of tattooing and many photographs of tattoos."⁸ Though Flannery O'Connor lived a relatively cloistered life in Milledgeville during most of her adulthood, intensive reading of literature and criticism, psychology, philosophy, theology and miscellaneous works enriched the creative source from which her stories flowed.

Her knowledge of art history and the background of

⁷Robert Donner, "She Writes Powerful Fiction," Sign, March, 1961, p. 48.

⁸Sister Kathleen Feeley, Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 149.

her thought about the form of the image of Christ are apparent in part of a review she wrote of Victor White's book, Soul and Psyche:

In discussing the prevalent lapse of Catholics brought up in Catholic homes and educated in Catholic schools, Father White observes that this is very likely a failure of our sacred images to sustain an adequate picture of what they are supposed to represent. The images absorbed in childhood are retained throughout life. In medieval times the child viewed the same images as his elders; and these were images adequate for the realities they stood for. He formed his image of the Lord from, for example, the stern and majestic Pantocrator, not from a smiling Jesus with a bleeding heart. When childhood was over, the image was still valid and was able to conduct him to a mature realization of his religion. Today the idea of religion of large numbers of Catholics remains trapped at the magical stage by static and superficial images which neither mind nor stomach can any longer take.⁹

The face of Christ tattooed on Parker's back in the story, "covered with all those little blocks," "red and blue and ivory and saffron squares," with its "heavy brows, a straight nose" and "all-demanding eyes" clearly fits the description of the great Pantocrator mosaics that are to be found looking down from the heights of Byzantine churches.

As in all of her stories, however, the experiences related in "Parker's Back," though bizarre, are all within the realm of possibility in that God-haunted rural South where

⁹Typescript of the review written for the Georgia Bulletin (Flannery O'Connor manuscript collection in Georgia College Library, Milledgeville).

tattooed men and other freaks were displayed in carnival side shows. The first of the attempts to write the story (Fragment A) begins with Parker's encounter with a tattooed man at the fair. In this version, as in the final draft, the vision was seminal for Parker, because both contain the following passage: "It was as if a blind man had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed." In some ways, however, this preliminary recounting of Parker's early life differs significantly from the published version. Some of the changes resulted in the strengthening and metaphoric enrichment of diction. Parker's "round white cap, sitting low on his forehead," became a "silly white cap, riding on his forehead." And Parker's eyes, which in the early version "seemed to reflect the immense blank spaces around him as if they too were full of space," later "reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea."

Other structural variants in Fragment A include passages which present unnecessary and distracting detail. When traveling from port to port, Parker was pleased to find that "the niggers in Africa had the same features as the niggers in Alabama," and that "the Chinese all looked alike and all looked like Chen Yang, the Chinese laundryman he knew at home." As a consequence, Parker surmised, "If you've seen one or two places you've seen everywhere else." None of this contributes meaning to the central focus of the story; O'Connor's discriminating

sense demanded that the passage be eliminated. She also reduced and altered the lines describing Parker's imaginative capacity from this original draft which reads:

At fifteen Parker could take a motor apart, or a clock, and put it together again, but he was not a boy capable of wonder. What he was told, he accepted when other people seemed to. His imagination extended as far as marriage but not to death.

These three sentences are compressed to a single line in the published story: "Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself," which in its concision and concept of wonder as a "motion," possesses far more dramatic impact than does the first draft.

Another sample of extraneous material which was ultimately excised demonstrates the way compression led to the wry humor for which O'Connor is so deservedly noted. One reads in this early draft that:

Parker began to drink beer. He got in a fight and spent two days in jail. His mother wept over what was becoming of him. One night she dragged him off to a revival but it had no effect on him; he was not saved that night. It was nearly time for the army to get Parker. With an unprecedented stroke of imagination he joined the navy.

Subsequently she experimented with another version, writing that Parker "jerked out of [his mother's] grasp and told her to go to hell. The next day he joined the navy to get away from the old battleaxe." Only after these trials did the final version emerge.

Parker began to drink beer and get in fights. His mother wept over what was becoming

of him. One night she dragged him off to a revival with her, not telling him where they were going. When he saw the big lighted church, he jerked out of her grasp and ran. The next day he lied about his age and joined the navy.

Here the abruptness and radical nature of his escape achieve a distinctly comic effect.

The changes made in this passage also illustrate the ways theme and characterization were refined, for in the early version Parker does attend the revival and then implicitly rejects the revelation of the Christian message which his "battleax" mother wanted him to embrace. In the final draft O'Connor deleted that derogatory epithet; his mother is instrumental in planting the first seeds of his prophetic vocation by having him baptized Obadiah Elihue. And Parker does not have a direct encounter with the image of Christ until that climactic scene when he collides with the great cruciform tree in the middle of the hay field.

The exclusion of Parker's words to his mother indicates, furthermore, that the writer's concept of Parker's laconic nature was gradually being refined.¹⁰ Other changes further demonstrate this development of characterization. Parker's first tattoo, for example, in the early draft is not an eagle but an anchor, an image which certainly denotes a

¹⁰In an interview for Censer, O'Connor stated "I don't think you have to know them [the people you're writing about] very well. You discover them." K. Fugina, F. Rivard, M. Sieh, "An Interview with Flannery O'Connor," Censer, Fall, 1960 (Reprinted Summer, 1965), p. 55.

stability not in keeping with Parker's peripatetic character. Hints of stupidity are also included in this early description of the protagonist. "He left school because he was sixteen and still in the ninth grade." Such deprecatory characterization is eliminated in the final version, in which Parker left school "because he was sixteen and could."

Surely the most significant change made, however, lay in the rearrangement of the episodes. In the first version the chronological rendering of events becomes a statement about time and Parker's consciousness. When one episode is finished, the next begins in this draft; time is perceived horizontally, and Parker's actions naturally grow out of those events which have immediately preceded them. In the published story, all of this information about Parker's background is presented as a flashback, and the disjunction in chronology emphasizes the ever present quality of the past. Time is seen to be vertical, and Parker's motivation is rooted in a consciousness of the totality of his experience. The published story opens with the description of Parker and his wife, and the drama of their conflict is apparent from the beginning of the story. Thus the reader's attention is drawn from the very outset to the tensions in their relationship; and in the scene at the conclusion, when Parker is standing on the same porch trying to get into his house, the story is unified--it has come full circle. Parker is back.

This kind of comparison of the preliminary draft, Fragment A, with the corresponding section of the published

version, therefore, reveals significant information about the ways Flannery O'Connor worked at her craft. Through experiment, compression and enrichment the story was gradually honed down and unified; the dramatic impact was heightened and the tale was enriched with humor. Similar comparative study of the other fragments and the final preliminary draft itself brings to light more radical alterations which demonstrate even more clearly than those already noted that the writer's vision of the story underwent profound changes during the course of experimenting with the idea--writing and rewriting and rewriting again.

None of the material from the three and a quarter page fragment just described, for example, was included in the second and third preliminary drafts. Instead, Parker gets tattooed because he "had found when he was only sixteen that women are attracted by tattoos. After he had made the discovery he had tattoos put on him for one reason or another until almost all the slightly places were covered." In fact, the tattoos are significant in these interim versions solely because they attract Sarah Ruth's attention in the beginning and later provide Parker with a way to demonstrate his love for her. For although ultimately the finished version deals primarily with metaphysical questions--the conflict between Sarah Ruth's harsh Old Testament beliefs in an incorporeal, vengeful God and Parker's mystical conversion to the incarnate Christ of the New Testament--the second unfinished fragment (B) is thematically concerned with the unexplainable quality of love and the

permanence of the marriage vow.

The different focus is apparent from the beginning in the domestic details which are included in this version but omitted from the final. Parker worries, for example, not about making payments to the loan company for his truck, but for the washing machine and refrigerator he has bought for his wife. The two of them are first described "sitting on a black leather sofa," a far cry from the hard uncushioned "steps" and "floor" on which they are seated in the final version. Throughout these earlier drafts, in fact, the sofa's image of softness is emblematic of the comparative softness of Sarah Ruth's and Parker's characters. Although Sarah Ruth even in this early manuscript is described with "skin on her face [which] was drawn as tight as the skin on an onion" and with eyes that "were grey and sharp like the points of an ice pick," she speaks "placidly" and is found "dallying over her words."

A startling and significant change was made in her name. In the final version her last name is Cates, and its one-syllable harshness reflects the terse quality of her character. In this earlier version (Fragment B) her euphonious last name was Flowers---which bespeaks a kind of blossoming beauty. That impression is deepened in the tentative description of their first encounter when Parker sees Sarah Ruth as "a shimmering figure against a background of pure gold. Her bare feet seemed not to be touching the ground." The portrayal suggests a likeness to a golden Byzantine icon of the madonna. In comic contrast, however, those signs of emotion, the "two pink spots"

reappear on her cheeks more than once, for "Parker had several ruses for bringing them out."

Parker himself is described far more fully in these preliminary drafts than in the final version, which focuses the reader's whole attention on his tattoos, the most significant image of the story. Earlier drafts present the distracting information that "Parker had bright red hair with sideburns and small eyes of an aquamarine hue" and that "he had on overalls and heavy high top work shoes" and "a grey felt hat with the brim turned down all around." He is "gallant" and asks Sarah Ruth if he can "hold her hand." Although in Fragment A and in the published story Parker was raised by a mother who began the work of salvation in him by having him baptized and by trying to take him to revival meetings, in this second draft (Fragment B) Parker was raised by a grandmother "who had beaten him frequently with a harness strap to impress her limited views upon him." Nonetheless, "she had so far failed to do this that Parker could not remember what her views were except that they were not logical and they interfered with nature." In keeping with this background his lengthy interior monologues and cogitations in Fragment B are centered not in "the vague unease," the hints of the supernatural which were reinforced by the vision of the tattooed man at the fair, but in the natural problems of love and marriage:

Before he married her, Parker had settled his mind on the problem of marriage. If it didn't make any difference if you didn't marry the woman you were living with, he reasoned, then it didn't

make any difference if you did marry the one you were fixing to live with. You could leave one you were married to as easy as one you weren't. The lucidity of this satisfied him enough before he was married, but after he was married, the problem began to gnaw at him again. He became suspicious that there was some hidden flaw in this reasoning and that he would wake up one morning and realize it and find himself trapped.

He decided to stop thinking about it until the time came when he wanted to leave her. At present he hated to leave her even to go to work. Every time she looked at him with her sharp grey eyes, his jaw dropped and he smiled open-mouthed and stunned.

His preoccupation with marriage in this early manuscript had been mysteriously reinforced when the Ordinary spoke the words, "Till death do you part" and Parker had "a sudden unexplainable sensation like a man with a mortal ailment who doesn't know he has it."

Later in this draft (Fragment B) the troublesome thought seemed to pursue him even more insistently:

Parker had always known his own mind and had been able to rely on himself not to do any foolish thing or to think about things that were not important but now every night when he would settle down for sleep he would find himself considering vague and abstract problems that the words "Till death do you part" suggested to him. The sentence was like the needle of a phonograph going around and around in his brain producing noisy thoughts that kept him awake.

One is reminded of the "ragged figure [of Christ] who moves from tree to tree in the back of his [Haze Motes'] mind;" yet here the pursuing shadow is simply (one is tempted to say merely) Parker's dim realization of the enduring quality of marriage!

In her "Replies to Two Questions," O'Connor had written that "In every story there is some minor revelation which, no matter how funny the story may be, gives us a hint of the unknown, of death."¹¹ In this early draft of "Parker's Back" even the mystery of death is inextricably entwined with Parker's worries about his wedded relationship with Sarah Ruth.

He looked forward to the time when he would be sick of Sarah Ruth and could prove to himself that he could walk off by doing it. He knew plenty of men who had walked off and left their wives. It was done every day. He could not understand where the feeling that he could not do it had come from. He could not put his finger on it. Certainly when he took the notion to leave her, he would leave her. There was nothing to stop him. He had always thought of death as a good thing because it rid the world of old people he had known had been onery and he had been glad to see them go, but now death began to appear to him in a different guise--as the only way to escape being married.

The encounter with "the unknown" is treated here almost as comedy and once again, the homely triviality of Parker's ruminations reveals the domestic quality of this telling of the tale.

Parker and Sarah Ruth even engage in a lengthy "pillow talk" dialogue about the subject of matrimony. The passage deserves being quoted in full because it reveals several significant variations from the final story.

One night as they were lying in the dark, he had said, "What would you do if I walked off and left you?"

¹¹ Flannery O'Connor, "Replies to Two Questions," Esprit, Winter, 1959, p. 10.

"I'd follow along behind," she said placidly. This had not occurred to Parker. "I could get away from you," he said. "I would go in the truck and be gone before you knew I was gone."

"If you were in China," she said flatly, "you would still be married to me."

Parker did not think it reasonable that when he left her, he would still be married to her. If he was gone, he was gone.

"If I ain't here, I ain't here," he said.

"If you ain't here you're still married," she said flatly. "You can never not be married except if your wife dies." Every word she uttered was like a brick laid down on Parker's chest. "You have to die not to be married," she said. "And after you die you will be judged on if you stay with your wife or not."

"Oh, shut up," Parker said.

"Then Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats," she went on.

"Jesus is a bunch of hot air," Parker said irritably.

"It's you that are a bunch of hot air," she said. "Jesus is Jesus."

Parker was sick of hearing about Jesus. With her it was Jesus this and Jesus that.

"What Jesus says, that you do," she said, "and if you don't you'll wish you had when the day of judgment comes."

Such a bedtime conversation would be completely uncharacteristic of the Parker and Sarah Ruth of the final version, in which their few exchanges are remarkable for their terseness. And one is struck by other differences. Although Sarah Ruth is implicitly identified with the Old Testament in the published version--she only mentions Jesus once--here, Jesus is at the

center of her statements about religion, "with her it was Jesus this and Jesus that." And God's wrath will descend upon Parker not because he has pictures "drew on him," but because he may not keep his marriage vows.

Indeed, striking evidence of radical alteration in the central focus of the story lies not just in the inclusion of these passages about matrimony in Fragment B, but also in the absence of many crucial passages relating to the tattoos. After deciding to have a religious subject tattooed on his back to please Sarah Ruth, Parker is seen driving into town:

. . . looking neither to the right or the left, concentrating so hard that the road before him was no more than a grey strip down which he automatically sped, until suddenly he brought the car to a screeching halt in the middle of the highway. The expression on his face was completely blank as if an apocalypse had paralyzed him. Then he started the truck again and sped on until he reached the city.

Here the "apocalyptic" inspiration to have Jesus tattooed on his back is briefly recounted, and, most importantly, it occurs in the cab of Parker's truck. Missing is the incandescent scene of the final version, the vivid rendering of Parker's mystical conversion at the foot of the burning tree which enflamed his mind.

Later in Fragment B the significance of the tattoos is also denigrated by the comical description of the artist. He answers the door "in his pajama bottoms," and we learn that he is "a large man named Speeds with bloodshot eyes and a bald head." Furthermore, he is "stupid and heavy, not quick like

Parker." Altogether, he is very different from the artist in the ultimate version who is "thin and bald" and who looks at Parker with "his intellectual superior stare." The dignity of the artist is of critical importance because of the significance of art itself in the final version. Art, O'Connor is implicitly stating in "Parker's Back," mirrors the incarnation of Christ, when it embodies and gives expression to theological truth.

Even the process of tattooing is diminished in this preliminary draft. None of the details about the washing, the ethyl chloride, the iodine pencil or the electric needle are included. In fact, the work is completed in one session, not the two that were finally required. Nor is any deliberation required to choose the form of the image from a book. Parker simply walks into the room and announces abruptly what he wants. "Listen," Parker said. "I want a Jesus on my back;" and later when the tattooist questions him, "What you want him doing?" Parker answers, "I don't care, just so there's no mistake it's him."

Soon after this exchange (on the thirteenth typewritten page) this fragment comes to a conclusion. Parker has taken off his shirt and the tattooist is working.

The idea had hit him so quickly and the sheer brilliance of it had dazzled him so completely that it was an hour or more after the artist began to work before Parker began to be suspicious that what he was doing might have some drawback to it.

Then his reflections carry him a step farther and this draft

ends with the lines: "Then an insidious suspicion began to insinuate itself into his thoughts. It was of the same order as his suspicion that now he would never not be married." It is fitting, of course, that this version should end with the reference to marriage, but the fact is inescapable that as written here the story is a somewhat simple domestic comedy, enlivened, to be sure, by the bizarre note of Parker's tattoos. O'Connor's own dissatisfaction with it is abundantly clear in the massive revisions made in the final draft, in which she eliminated these long passages about matrimony.

Perhaps when she saw in print her words about Parker's "suspicions that what he was doing might have some drawback to it," she realized her own suspicions of the story. More importantly, though, one cannot help but speculate that the imaginative vision of the tattooed image of Christ on Parker's back was the generating inspiration for the last and infinitely more profound version of the story. When asked once about symbols, she said that "a symbol is like an engine in a story, and I usually discover as I write something in the story that is taking on more and more meaning so that as I go along, before long, that something is turning or working the story."¹² In the final draft the tattooed Pantacrator does indeed become the central thematic image in a tale which has been "turned,"

¹²K. A. Porter, F. O'Connor, C. Gordon, M. Jones, and L. D. Rubin, "Recent Southern Fiction: A Panel Discussion," Bulletin of Wesleyan College, January, 1961, p. 12.

transformed, so that it illuminates "that particular heresy which denies Our Lord corporeal substance."¹³

Even in the final complete preliminary draft the transformations suggest that in the course of rewriting O'Connor kept delving deeper into the metaphysical roots of the story's underpinnings, of which she was at first only superficially conscious. Three abortive attempts at writing the first page of the new draft, for example, demonstrate that she was still in the process of refining her vision of the tale, its characters and setting. The first experiment begins with a description of Parker's three room house "close to the edge of an embankment overlooking the highway. He and his wife sat on the porch on the detached back seat of a car that some former tenant had left there." In the second the order of the sentences is reversed and the embankment has changed--first to a "rutted red" and then to a "steep pink." Finally in the third attempt is the sentence that opens the published version: "Parker's wife was sitting on the front porch snapping beans," which draws the reader immediately into the action of the story--clear evidence of the writer's superb sense of drama. The alterations in imagery, however, are also significant; as noted before, the elimination of cushioning serves as an indication of the hardness of their lives together, and the reader is given an early hint of Sarah Ruth's snappish temper. Through

¹³Gordon, "An American Girl," op. cit., p. 136.

a creative exploration of options which included experiment with structural arrangement, the elimination of unnecessary detail and, finally, the refinement and enrichment of imagery. Flannery O'Connor at last discovered the gem-like opening of "Parker's Back."

Examples of a similar process abound throughout this last preliminary draft. It is clear, for example, that O'Connor's concept of Sarah Ruth's character had sharpened since the composition of the earlier draft, for a considerable amount of derogatory description was at first included in this final version. She wrote that Sarah Ruth "was too stupid to get the government on" Parker, and that she was "very ugly. . . a kind of old young." She was "gawky as a young half-grown half-starved mule" and "a bag of bones, a hank of hair." All of this information was crossed out, however, and deleted in the process of revision so that finally one's impressions of Sarah Ruth are drawn from her speech and actions, from showing rather than telling.

The revisions in the first crucial exchange between Parker and Sarah Ruth, in front of her "shot-gun house," evince similar conceptual development and dramatic compression. After Sarah Ruth's broom, "the terrible bristly claw," had hit him, we read in this final preliminary draft that:

Parker's vision was so blurred that for an instant he thought he had been attacked by some heavenly creature which had descended on him directly out of nowhere, a giant hawk-eyed angel wielding some fantastic weapon. As his sight cleared he saw it was a tall raw-boned girl with

a broom. He was as stunned as Moses in the face of a bush suddenly breaking into flame.

The "shot-gun house" and the adjective "heavenly," the importance given to the "descent on him directly out of nowhere," and the likening of Parker's response to that of Moses before the burning bush all lead the reader to the expectation that for Parker this is the kind of cataclysmic encounter which so often leads directly to conversion in O'Connor's work. But if that was O'Connor's original intent, she altered it in the writing, for the portentous adjective "shot-gun" was softened to read "two room," the clause about the descent abbreviated to the phrase "from above him" and the reference to Moses completely deleted. Had the passage remained as it was, it would have stolen fire from that major scene at the climax of the story in which Parker crashes the tractor, and furthermore would have misled the reader to think that Sarah Ruth was directly the instrument of Parker's illumination. Such revisions provide further evidence that the writer's imaginative vision of the tale, even in this final preliminary draft, was being gradually refined, sharpened, as was her telling of it.

Similar honing occurred in numerous passages describing Parker and his state of mind in this last corrected manuscript. The information that Parker would "see her [Sarah Ruth] in hell" before he was saved was deleted from the first page. And later, after the tattoo has been finished, Parker's farewell speech to the tattooist is crossed out. It read: "Going to get me a

drink," Parker said. "Going to get good and drunk and then I'm going home and show the old woman this and then I'm going to give her a good beating and bust some sense into her head." Such active animosity toward his wife is scarcely consistent with Parker's character, his bewildered attraction for Sarah Ruth, and the author wisely eliminated it in the course of revision.

Another passage denoting a kind of general malice in Parker was also deleted. At first, Parker's motivation in frequenting pool halls lay in his desire to "rid himself of obnoxious thoughts by infecting someone else with them. While he talked they would seem to go out of his head into a wider field of heads until, spread thin they no longer worried him." The passage is, of course, an example of O'Connor's masterly description of insidious evil, but perceptive as it is, she had the discriminating sense to reject it as uncharacteristic of Parker, who, in the final version, is clearly a kind of backwoods rustic innocent--who is capable of responding to the mysterious theophony of the burning tree.

At times, however, the reader is struck by the sheer lyricism of a deleted passage. On Parker's trip home, for example, "Three or four mountains rose like the backs of sleeping animals against the black sky. There were no clouds but the moon was paltry and pale. Parker ran over a possum almost at the instant he saw its glittering red eyes. . . ." A lesser writer would have insisted on keeping the passage simply because it is good, but O'Connor evidently recognized that such vivid

imagery could serve the reader, mistakenly, as an omen of violent death in the conclusion so she relinquished it.

Not all of the revisions in this last preliminary draft, however, are the result of compression and deletion. Frequently the addition of a single word, a phrase, or a whole passage resulted in enrichment of the story, and unification. Mention of the pecan tree under which Parker "leans crying like a baby" at the end of the story is inserted in the description of the house at the beginning. And the broom which is Sarah Ruth's "hoary weapon" on their first and last encounters, appears additionally in this final version when Parker "might have been a stray pig or goat that had wondered into the yard and she too tired to take up the broom and sweep it off."

Although O'Connor deleted one passage that would seem to be too obvious an explanation of Parker's motivation ("His mother had left the name Jesus in his soul like an iron stake marking a vanished property line."), several major augmentations in this final draft reinforced, illumined the thematic core of the story. The whole naming episode, for example, in which we learn of Parker's prophetic first and second names is added in this last version, as is the information that Sarah Ruth "thought churches were idolatrous." Parker's night at the "Haven of Light flop house" with its "phosphorescent cross glowing at the end of the room" constitutes another thematically significant enlargement. In an earlier experiment Parker had paid the artist a dollar and a half for staying in his room

during the night. Here, the "Haven of Light" together with "the phosphorescent cross" reincarnate the vivid image at the flaming tree which had led to Parker's conversion. These increments, together with the deletions already noted, show that the writer's vision continued to be deepened and clarified in its perspective even in the final draft of the story. For Flannery O'Connor it is apparent that the difficult "chore" of writing was a way of knowing that did indeed lead to "seeing through reality" to that "realm of mystery which is the concern of prophets."¹⁴

We should not, of course, be surprised at discovering her imagination carrying her deeper and deeper into the metaphysical levels of meaning earlier hidden in the first versions of the story. She expressed her epistemological point of view on numerous occasions, writing that "prophetic insight is a quality of the imagination,"¹⁵ and that "reason should always go where the imagination goes,"¹⁶ and, again, that "Imagination is a form of knowledge."¹⁷ In fact, Flannery O'Connor was so unusually articulate when speaking or writing about her craft that all of the revisions throughout the various drafts of

¹⁴Margaret Meaders, "Flannery O'Connor: Literary Witch," Colorado Quarterly, Spring, 1962, p. 384.

¹⁵Joel Wells, "Off the Cuff," Critic, August-September, 1962, p. 72.

¹⁶O'Connor, "Replies to Two Questions," loc.cit.

¹⁷Fugina, Rivard, and Sieh, op. cit., p. 55.

"Parker's Back" simply serve as proof of the statements she had made about the meticulous work in rewriting again and again, the search for and gradual development of characterization, and, finally, the significance of a central image.

Genetic criticism of "Parker's Back" is valuable, therefore, because it lends weight to the statements the writer made about her craft. But it also yields significant information about Flannery O'Connor herself and the overriding concerns of her life. Henry James likened his own work at revising to that of a painter freshening a canvas to bring out "buried secrets,"¹⁸ and in an essay on Turgenieff James stated that revelation of the writer's mind is of critical importance to the reader.

The great question as to a poet or a novelist is, How does he feel about life? What, in the last analysis, is his philosophy? When vigorous writers have reached maturity, we are at liberty to gather from their works some expression of a total view of the world they have been so actively observing. This is the most interesting thing their works offer us. Details are interesting in proportion as they contribute to make it clear.¹⁹

The revisions of "Parker's Back" are interesting because the reader can see in them the ways "buried secrets" of the work were revealed, and also because they do indeed serve as interesting details" which "contribute to make clear" Flannery

¹⁸Henry James in "The Preface" to the revised version of Roderick Hudson, Henry James (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), p. xiii.

¹⁹Quoted in Henry James, The Major Phase, F. O. Matthiessen (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 131.

O'Connor's mind.

Passages added at the end of the story, for example, lead to insights about the writer's state of mind when she was conscious of the ephemeral quality of her own existence. Tentative versions of two such passages are handwritten on the notebook page she was evidently working on when she spoke to Caroline Gordon. In one, Parker is examining his soul: "He saw it as a sooty spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but that appeared to be to the authority beyond." Another reads: "Parker stood with his back against the door like a man pinned there by an arrow. His skin felt brittle and transparent, irradiated by the strange light. He felt like some fragile thing of nature, turned by the light into a perfect arabesque of colors that only himself and the Lord could see." One cannot help but see in these passages a sign of the writer's own perception of being shortly before her death.

Of even greater significance is the fact that she rejected the version of the story (Fragment B) which is preoccupied with the theme of matrimony. Flannery O'Connor, of course, had no immediate knowledge of the problems of marriage, so she was handicapped in writing in detail about it. But it is apparent that the subject matter was flawed in far more significant ways, for its very naturalness did not allow for exploration of those theological and aesthetic verities which constituted the principle preoccupations in both her life and her art. In rejecting the preliminary version which focused

on Parker's marriage vow, she chose instead the story's telling in which the primary focus is on the mysteries of man's relationship with eternal truths and the artistry which incarnates them.

Moreover, genetic criticism can lead to better understanding of the writer's intentions and the story's value. For in the process described above, the story gained incalculably in profundity and breadth of vision. By de-emphasizing the natural day-to-day concerns of married life, O'Connor intends the reader to focus on Parker's awakening to his prophetic vocation--to that heavenward direction foretold by the tattooed "eagle" in the revised version. In fact, the revisions all serve as signposts to the reader that such a resolution is finally to be reached. The addition to the naming episode, for example, suggests to the reader that Parker's mother has sown the seeds of prophetic vision in her son. Later in the published story, one can see that the conflict and tension with his anti-church wife Ruth led to a kind of negative impulse toward the truth. And his preoccupation with those tensions caused the ultimate revelation of the supernatural in his collision with the tree which is the center of the field---just as the unacknowledged Christ had been at the center of Parker's field of vision, his gestalt, from the beginning of the story. Finally, the art of the tattooist, instead of being simply a ruse for attracting women, has become the symbol throughout the story of Parker's sense that artistry, mirroring the Word which became flesh, incarnates God's truth

for humanity.

Genetic criticism, then, can serve as an invaluable critical tool, and it reveals something of the author herself and her intentions; furthermore, it illumines the imaginative development of the story, the ways in which alterations in the form and content led to meaning. Disciplined effort and the creative process itself transformed the crudity of the early drafts of "Parker's Back" to the art of the final version. For the critic who has been intrigued at the seeming "ease" with which she communicates the vagaries of man's relationships with ultimate goodness and evil, fascination lies in following the path along which her imagination led her. Like the hound dog to which she likened herself once, we too can "follow the scent." And if as she said, "It's the wrong scent and you stop and go back,"²⁰ in the manuscripts one can pursue the story's trail on its winding way to its final telling.

²⁰"An Interview with Flannery O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren," Vagabond, February, 1960, p. 9.

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